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ABSTRACT

Most American visitors to Japanese senior high schools have observed only the very best public academic schools in the nation. Two-thirds of Japanese students attend other schools. This book presents findings of a case study that focused on the 12th-grade experience in a Japanese public general high school. The data were supplemented by visits to a dozen other secondary schools. The book discusses some important points of Japanese secondary education: (1) which is more important, group citizenship or examination passage, and (2) which is stressed more in Japanese high schools, student individualism or common fundamental academic ability? Following the introduction, chapter 2 describes the varieties of Japanese high schools and chapter 3 provides an overview of the 12th-grade curriculum and schedule. Instructional strategies are outlined in the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter explains the goals of Japanese secondary schools: inculcating group citizenship and passing a university-entrance examination. The characteristics and perspectives of Japanese students are compared to those of their American counterparts in chapter 6. The seventh chapter concludes that Japanese education will not provide American educators with solutions to the problems found in U.S. schools. The study found that the educational experiences of Japanese secondary school students in the public academic secondary schools seemed totally shaped by an all-important educational quartet: the development of group citizenship; a national curriculum; memorization-oriented instructional strategies; and the all-consuming importance of the university-entrance examination. A Japanese secondary school teacher and a university professor respond to the book in the final chapter. Two figures are included. (Contains 10 references.) (LMI)

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The Japanese Secondary School
A Closer Look

The Japanese Secondary School
A Closer Look

Paul S. George
with Evan George

Foreword by Tadahiko Abiko

National Middle School Association
and
National Association of Secondary School Principals

Dr. Paul George is the middle school movement's leading international expert. He has spent significant blocks of time visiting schools and lecturing in Asia, Europe, and elsewhere. A professor at the University of Florida, Paul has contributed substantially to the professional literature.

The associations are grateful to him for his scholarship and for the opportunity to publish jointly this important study. Appreciation is also extended to Evan George and Professor Takehiko Mieko for their important contributions to this study.

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and
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Contents

Acknowledgments iv

Foreword by Ludolfus Sloker v

1. Introduction 1

2. Varieties of the Japanese High Schools 4

3. The Twelfth Grade Curriculum and Schedule 9

4. Instructional Strategies 23

5. Goals of Japanese Secondary Schools 33

6. The High School Experience:
Japanese and American Student Perspectives 37

7. What Can Americans Learn from the
Japanese Secondary School? 49

8. Japanese Educators Respond 63

References 67

Acknowledgments

No one does not complete an extensive an educational study as either the 1988 study or the 1993 follow-up study reported here without the considerable assistance and support of many individuals and associations. Such is certainly true in my case, for I have been greatly blessed by the assistance of so many persons in both Japan and the United States as well as by the Japanese Society for the Study of American Education and the University of Florida which contributed financial and organizational arrangements that made the study possible.

I am especially thankful for the friendship of Professor Tadahiko Shiba and his considerable help over the past nine years in both studies. Professors Norihiro Nishio, Sabato Sato, and lead teacher Motoo Kawata provided much assistance in this study, and I am most grateful to them.

I believe that the extension of the invitation to conduct this case study at Hiroshu School reflects considerable professional courage on the part of my Japanese colleagues, the teachers and administrators at Hiroshu, and the staff of the School of Education at the nearby university. Field research of this sort, conducted by foreign visitors such as myself, who are not primarily students of the Japanese language and culture, might easily result in serious misunderstanding or valid unwarranted conclusions

that could be embarrassing to many. I wish, therefore, to make it very clear that the findings reported in this monograph are mine and mine alone. I apologize for whatever inaccuracy, misrepresentation, or error may appear herein.

Finally, I appreciate the contribution of John Lounsbury, NAMA's editor, for his efforts to bring this report into print and to Mary Mitchell for her conscientious work in designing the monograph and directing the publication process.

— Paul George

June, 1995

FOREWORD — *Tadahiko Ishiko*

There are only a few people in the United States who are interested in Japanese education and schools. That is natural, because here in Japan I cannot find many Japanese people who have interests with foreign countries and their education or schools, rather most Japanese believe they have much better school education than those abroad.

However, in my experience I have learned from many foreign educational ideas, systems, schools, curriculum theories, and instructional strategies. Therefore, I believe we can, sometimes we must, learn from each other, though it is very difficult to do so because there are a lot of differences in educational history, school systems, educational thought, and cultural backgrounds. But difficulty is not the same as impossibility. I should be surprised that most people think we cannot learn from each other and exchange our experiences and ideas in education.

Because of difficulty of comparative and proper research in the education area, I am very surprised to find Professor George's observations of school life in this monographs to be very objective and neutral. He restrains himself rigidly enough to evaluate Japanese high school student behavior with American point of view. Many of the western researchers just criticize the Japanese entrance examination system because of its terrible effect on student

examinations. I partly agree. However, many Japanese don't think so. They believe the examination system is necessary for the young people because it gives good experiences for them to overcome difficult situations in their lives like war experiences. In my opinion, I am sure it would be better that the high school or college entrance examination should be taken away as soon as possible and in secondary schools more elective subjects should be given to deepen students' individuality with independent study style. Professor Ueno's discusses some important and vital points on Japanese secondary education.

First there is the question, *Which is more important, group citizenship or examination passage?* In most Japanese parents' viewpoint, examination passage is much more important during secondary education than group citizenship in the academic high schools. In fact many more Japanese parents are concerned about the academic abilities of their sons and daughters. Is it really bad? I think it is understandable because of academically trained teachers at school. However, most teachers complain of the parents' attitude that both these two goals are under their responsibilities.

I feel, therefore, the parents' attitude is not fair and teachers have too much responsibility, especially in group citizenship, for it is reasonable that the parents should share their responsibility with teachers in group citizenship of their children. However, generally speaking, in Japanese schools they support teachers' concern for group citizenship indirectly but surely care more about raising the students' academic attainment in terms of safety at classroom and concentration on learning at school. From this point of view, most school teachers also feel it is necessary for them to have the responsibility to cultivate group citizenship among students in spite of their heavy load. It seems

to be essential so the students can concentrate on the preparation for the entrance examinations. But at present their responsibility is too much and they cannot have enough time to prepare for good teaching and instruction.

Second is the question of which is more stressed in Japanese high schools, student individuality or common fundamental academic ability? So far Japanese high schools have increased the opportunity for a wider range of student individualities. However, many students, not their parents, feel that their individuality is not so emphasized in constructing their curriculum. The parents want their children to get common level of academic abilities, not to develop their individualities, even in secondary schools.

There are some Japanese people who think the Japanese traditional attitude to stress the common education and curriculum in every grade of schools should be changed. The discussion above is certainly related deeply to basic academic skills and creativity. Most Americans seem to believe that creativity is most important in school education. But they have to learn that school education must work not only to develop the creativity of students but also to make sure of basic skills necessary for their creativity and their daily lives. I believe basic skills must be essential for creativity as well as for citizenship. Unless the students have basic skills, they cannot live as an ordinary citizen in many ways and in many places such as hospitals, city hall, stations, and so forth. The basic skills are essential to all the students to become good citizens. There are few American educationists and educational psychologists who are aware of this kind of view and importance.

This monograph will be valuable and useful for both Japanese and American teachers, researchers, and parents. You will find Professor George is one of the most insightful and best researchers about Japanese secondary educa-

tion because he has observed the whole secondary education through the eye of both a parent and a researcher as well as through the eye of his son who has experienced a Japanese lower secondary, junior high school life as a freshman and also an upper secondary, high school life as a senior student. Dr. George's analysis is reflected as I observed by his statistical experience.

I really hope the Japanese people learn from this monograph and reform our school to 6-3-3 system and entrance examination soon, and the American people learn the social, not psychological, importance of group citizenship and basic intellectual skills. I have no doubt that the Japanese can learn more from American middle schools and high schools.

1

INTRODUCTION

In early 1993, I received an invitation from a major national Japanese university, and the faculty of a secondary school nearby, to conduct a case study of the twelfth grade in that senior high school (what the Japanese would call "upper secondary school"). The invitation contained a rare opportunity – permission to conduct an in-depth case study of a Japanese senior high school, from the inside. In place of the usual polite and perfunctory visits to exemplary elementary, junior high, or high schools, which both Japanese and American educators routinely arrange for each other, I was invited to spend an extended amount of time (six weeks) in an unstructured examination of the twelfth grade at Hondo School, a secondary school with grades 7–12. Instead of the more common quantitative comparisons of international academic achievement based on test score data, the case study would attempt to describe, in as much realistic detail as possible, the day-to-day organization and operation of one Japanese high school. I accepted the invitation with enthusiasm.

In conjunction with this case study, and an earlier case study of the same students when they were in the seventh grade at Hondo School (George, 1989), I visited another dozen secondary schools, took hundreds of

Hondo School is a pseudonym.

photographic observation of different teachers in as many as 300 hours of classroom sessions, and conducted interviews with several dozen students, teachers, researchers, and parents. In a strategy designed to permit me to view the life of the school and classroom more quickly, deeply, and smoothly, permission was also given for my twelfth grade son, Evan, to enroll as a short-time student in the same grade at Hiroshu School. I also went to classes in which Evan was enrolled. Consequently, instead of entering the school as a "foreign researcher," a relatively rare and threatening practice, I was regarded by both teachers and students more as a father very interested in the educational success of his son, which they accepted even though fathers seldom visit schools in Japan, especially high school. In fact, some students referred to me as "Papa-san" from the beginning. Entry into and involvement with the life of the 12th graders in this school was accomplished without difficulty.

> Evan: *This trip seemed, at first, to have many similarities to the first one, when I visited the 7th grade. It was the same building, the same length of time for the visit, and so on; but there was one big change I saw right away. The young, small, energetic, and enthusiastic students I remembered from 7th grade had grown into young adults who were hardly recognizable. Their hair styles varied, and the students' clothing styles showed much more individual choice. My memory of the school's strict dress code just didn't fit. My first impressions of my old friends was nothing like I expected. Once we began talking together, however, I realized that they were the same students that knocked themselves out introducing me to Japan five years earlier.*

What American visitors, and even Japanese educational researchers, have sometimes seen on visits to Japanese senior high schools has been a picture that may have included only the very best of the public academic high schools in the nation, but two-thirds of Japanese students do not attend these schools. Visits have rarely been permitted in less "honorable" academic (called "general" in Japan) high schools or in public vocational schools of various kinds (including commercial and technical schools), and one-third of the students attend private high schools. Little has been known about practices, programs, and outcomes in schools that were not academic, most honorable, and public. Hamilton School was, perhaps because it was closely associated with a major university where I had developed strong relationships, uniquely open to an in-depth observation. A

2

Varieties of the Japanese High School

Completion of the junior high school program at ninth grade marks the end of formal, mandatory, general education in Japan, although substantially more than 90% of the students have continued with secondary education through graduation from a high school program. Virtually all Japanese high schools have included grades ten through twelve. In Japan, however, the American style comprehensive high school has not existed, except in some rural areas. It has been estimated that approximately one-third of Japanese high school graduates have attended a public academic, college preparatory high school; one-third have attended private academic high schools; and one-third attended vocational, commercial, or industrial high schools where less than half of the curriculum was academic and most of the time and attention was devoted to preparation for the world of work (N. Sato, personal communication, December 11, 1993). Consequently, the generalizations that might be accurately made about American high schools have been much more difficult to develop in regard to Japanese high school programs. This study focused on the twelfth grade experience in one public general high school.

Since attendance at high school was voluntary, and admission was attained mostly by examination, placement in the high school one preferred has been far from guar-

entered. It is widely agreed that one of the most difficult times in the life of a Japanese secondary school student has been during the ninth grade, the last year of junior high school in Japan, when the high school entrance examinations were given. The results of these examinations determined the specific high school students attended and, assuming attendance at an academic high school, the nature of the college preparatory experience received. High school students often, consequently, traveled substantial distances, frequently spending an hour or more in transit one way, to get to their designated school.

The status of the academic high schools and the university entrance examinations they focused on was then directly related to the test score achieved and the level of post-secondary education a student entered. Of course the nature and status of the post-secondary education attended was directly connected to the quality of lifelong career or employment pursued. In fact, the lives of many Japanese students, once they entered the end of elementary school, certainly by junior high school, were dominated by an all-consuming attention to a tournament-like set of staggeringly difficult examinations and school entrance applications. It has been a process that eliminated ever larger numbers of students from the more prestigious opportunities that were available at the pinnacle of academic achievement, graduation from the University of Tokyo or another major national university.

The reputations of all academically-oriented general high schools were, therefore, based on the number of graduating students who were admitted to one of the nine or ten prestigious public universities (e.g., the University of Tokyo, Nagoya University, Kyoto University, and so on). While the ranking of high schools for this purpose has become unofficial, everyone concerned appeared to know

exactly what rank a particular high school had within its district with regard to university entrance. Parents, students, and teachers devoted tremendous attention and developed considerable anxiety regarding the high school experience that preceded the university entrance examinations.

Hondoo High School

The reputation and ranking of Hondoo High School was, students and faculty asserted, "somewhere near the middle." Students, teachers, administrators, and professors from a major university, to whom this question was addressed, agreed that "about half" of the students from the senior class would eventually pass an examination to a college, university, or some other type of post-secondary education; the other half would enter the world of work after high school graduation. The curriculum and daily classroom experiences of all twelfth grade students at Hondoo High School were, nonetheless, almost exclusively focused on college entrance examinations.

Hondoo High School was quite small for a Japanese high school, containing approximately 630 students: 236 students in grades 7-9, and 394 in grades 10-12. Typically, Japanese high schools contain one to two thousand students in the three upper grades. The building was approximately 35 years old and located on the edge of the campus of a major university, with which it was loosely associated, in a style similar to American university laboratory schools. The faculty and students of the school most often described it as liberal in comparison to other high schools. The ages of the students were roughly

the same as American students in the same grades. The hallways were laid out much like American schools; the desks and chairs in the classrooms looked familiar. Gymnasiums, music areas, home economics and industrial arts suites, science labs, and the health clinic – all looked similar to what might be found in an American school. The day was divided into six equal periods, just like many American high schools, except that Japanese students also attended school three of every four Saturday mornings. Even the sort of instruction looked familiar. Walking down the halls permitted the visitor to see teachers at the front of every classroom, usually standing on a raised platform and engaging in the sort of large group, teacher-directed instruction common in most American high schools. Eventually we discovered that there were many other similarities, some of which neither the Japanese nor Americans were happy about.

> I said, *The school building was much older than my school, but I was impressed how the Japanese students took care of the building. Much better than the students at my school. They were careful about their trash, and raised around every afternoon to clean up their homerooms.* [3]

3

The Twelfth Grade Curriculum and Schedule

The annual school calendar for Japanese high schools begins with opening ceremonies in April and the first semester continued until late July. The second semester began at the end of August and concluded for winter holidays in late December. The examination period was in January and then the second semester brought the school year to a close in March, following the important school chorus and baseball contests and, finally, graduation.

Because of the national curriculum, the importance of the university entrance examination, and the strict control of schools by the Ministry of Education, Monbusho (through prefectural boards of education), there was a great deal of similarity among the public high school calendars and curricular programs in Japan. The twelfth grade curriculum at Hiroshin High School, as in virtually all twelfth grades in Japanese academic high schools, contained a number of compulsory subjects for all students.

> I was [a] Japanese friend studied more than I do and I go to my friends at home. I expected that they would all be very afraid of us. They had more academic abilities than we do. I remember, I'm very sure, being shocked by the 3rd grade students'

amazing attention and dedication to school. Now as a high school senior, I noticed a dramatic change in my peers' interest in school. Many of the high school students reminded me of the unmotivated American students in my classes at home.

Modern Japanese language, world history, algebra and geometry (recently ability grouped), probability and statistics, a natural science, physical education, English, homeroom activities, and club participation were all required at some point during the senior year. Optional classes (within limits) in these same general subject areas included classical Japanese literature, politics and economics, calculus, additional natural science, and English courses. A number of courses that had been included in the general education curriculum of the junior high school (art, moral education, industrial arts, music, home economics, calligraphy, extended home room times) were missing from the curriculum of the senior year.

Club participation, mentioned above, is an element in a student's schedule at both junior and senior high school levels. The following club activities were available throughout the secondary school years, grades 7-12: Japanese team handball, basketball, baseball, archery, tennis, badminton, swimming, fine arts, brass band, amateur radio, table tennis, homemaking, canvassing, English literature, chemistry, Korean Language, Russian, running, and peace movement. Students usually would join a club early in junior high school and remain a member until high school graduation.

Students exercised some choice, with the homeroom advisor's concurrence, in designing a schedule that included both required and optional components adding up to 33 class hours weekly. Each's weekly sched-

Figure 1
Evan's Weekly Schedule

1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						

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ule (Figure 1) for the six weeks he attended more resembled the schedule of a typical student who might have been aiming for a post-secondary education as something other than the natural sciences and mathematics. (Note that the schedule includes Saturday morning.) Since Japanese colleges and universities were highly diverse and remarkably specialized, students who did not aspire to one of the nine prestigious national public universities often tailored their high school schedules in a way that fit the alternate, more easily entered post-secondary school of their choice, and the examinations it required.

> *Yuri: I think I like our annual calendar better, but I think both daily schedules have a lot of wasted time. My schedule didn't have math every day. I like that. I think the Japanese and American curriculums for the 12th grade are very similar. I can't say that I prefer one to the other, but both seemed to me to be restrictive, limiting students' opportunities. The curriculums are too narrow. I think, and are driven by a reliance on memorization. For example, in my history class at home, the teacher required all of the students to research their family tree, where there were many other possibilities we could have chosen to learn the same things.*

Every Monday morning school began a half hour early, at Hoshiba and many other high schools, with an all-school assembly. An extension of the junior high school emphasis on building a sense of loyalty and community (George, 1990), the assembly most often focused on some aspect of what Americans call character education. The assembly was followed by the homeroom period, also an extension of the junior high school program, lasting for

about 15 minutes each morning of the week, including Saturdays. Homeroom was an important experience for all Japanese secondary students but the emphasis on building the sense of community, which overrode everything in the junior high school, gave way in academic senior high schools to more college preparatory concerns. Nevertheless, high school seniors were still tightly connected to their homerooms, and many classes were taken as a homeroom group, with teachers changing classes and traveling to the students' homerooms, rather than the typical American pattern in which teachers stay put and students move to another class.

Each Monday and Thursday afternoon, the homeroom group spent a total of two additional hours together. In the junior high school, this time was devoted to developing group unity, a sense of belonging and loyalty, through homerooms and club activities. In the senior year, these hours were used almost exclusively for college preparation activities of various kinds. Between the morning homeroom and the first class of the day, and between all classes, there was a ten minute period of unsupervised time which was sometimes used for passing from the homeroom to another class, and at other times it was simply a time for relaxation.

Every schedule illustrates several other important aspects of the Japanese twelfth grade curriculum. No two days were the same; there was a substantial amount of variety in the schedule, especially since no course met for [illegible] than three days a week, and many met only twice. Japanese language study, for example, was divided into several subcategories: composition, modern Japanese literature, classical Japanese literature, each meeting only two or three times in a week. Algebra and geometry, for [illegible], was required three times a week, but other ma-

dents also enrolled in probability and statistics and in differential and integral calculus. English was required of all students for three hours a week, and they had been the case since the beginning of the seventh grade, but many students enrolled for 3-6 more hours of what was primarily English composition. (English composition is an important part of virtually all post-secondary entrance examinations.) Two required hours of a social studies (politics and economics) and two of a natural science (biology, physics) required hours of physical education were built into every student's schedule. Every week also included additional courses in geography, English, and Chinese literature.

Each day of the week also ended with a return to the homeroom for about 15 minutes, during which time students helped to clean the room and the surrounding areas as they had done all during their public school years. Japanese public school students took responsibility for the cleanliness of their classrooms; no maids or custodians did it for them. Our observations indicated that secondary school students undertook these responsibilities naturally and without dispute; more often than not, they performed these duties with enthusiasm. During the entire year, the clean ups were done quickly and quietly but still with a minimum of teacher supervision.

> *Fact: The homeroom teacher usually came to the classroom at the end of the day to talk with students about the examinations that was coming, and about college applications.*

After school hours, until university entrance examinations were near, almost every twelfth grade student was involved in a club where he or she had held membership

The Teacher's Schedule

The life of the teacher in the Japanese high school is different, in several ways, from that of American counterparts. Figure 2 illustrates the schedule of what was probably a typical week for an experienced teacher at the high school level, in this case that of a social studies teacher during the week of October 12, 1993. Like the students,

Figure 2
A Teacher's Weekly Schedule

1			C	A	F	B
2	A			I		C
3			I		C	A
4	C				A	
5	B			B		
6		Univ			B	

A 16

the teacher had a six-day week, and sometimes seven, if supervision of club activities occurred on a Sunday. Japanese teachers undertook responsibility for many after-school activities, but especially club supervision. When clubs met daily throughout the week, students counted on the teacher for support, coaching, and supervision. So, just as the students might have been involved in school activities seven days a week, so might the teacher's job.

On the left side of the schedule, the numbers 1–6 indicate the periods of the day, and the Japanese characters across the top indicate the days of the week, Monday through Saturday. On Monday, for example, this social studies teacher was scheduled for a meeting with other teachers the first period. During the second, fourth, and fifth periods, he was assigned to teach three different twelfth grade homeroom groups (A,B,C). On Tuesday of this particular week, although it is not the same every week, the teacher is provided with a planning day, but that afternoon he is also responsible for teaching a university class on "Methods of Social Studies Education." On Wednesday, he had two classes to teach (C, E), and the remaining time for planning. Thursday's schedule reflects time for two different meetings and three classes. On Friday, this teacher had four classes in six periods. Saturday morning, the teacher had three additional classes. On Saturday afternoon, the teacher was honored with being a part of the group that was redesigning the nationwide public university general entrance examinations, a responsibility that took a great deal of time and effort.

Each morning and afternoon the teacher conducted homeroom activities, and in Japan the homeroom teacher was very important. As a homeroom teacher, this educator had extensive responsibilities for following the progress of each student, especially as college entrance activities

show near. At the close of the school day, the teacher remained at school until at least 5:10 P.M. for supervision of students in club activities, curriculum planning, monthly inservice sessions, parent conferences, and teacher grade level, department, and faculty meetings. This teacher, and most others with whom I have interacted in this and other high schools, had a classroom teaching load of about 15 hours per week, while students were in class 33 hours each week.

Exam: Japanese teachers seem to have a much lighter schedule than my teachers at home.

It remains difficult to judge who works harder, American or Japanese teachers. Compared to American teachers, this was an extremely light class load but probably because of additional responsibilities, and it required regular late afternoon and Saturday duties, which are rarely required of American high school teachers. American teachers frequently take school work home with them, even if they do leave school earlier. Japanese teachers may have 40–50 students in a class, but five to ten fewer classes each week. Huge classes may be difficult, but 25 second-semester American twelfth grade students often are more challenging to teach than larger numbers of more docile, conforming, and diligent Japanese students. Japanese teachers, generally, are well paid in comparison to salaried workers in the Asian corporate world and have a high status in Japanese society. American teachers work 60 fewer days each year, and their status is seriously lower than their Japanese counterparts. A

4

Instructional Strategies

Japanese twelfth grade teachers adhered strictly to the direct instruction model. The preference for a traditional hierarchical model that fits the culture as a whole – large classes, teachers changing classrooms instead of students – these factors shaped instruction toward the conventional secondary model. The ever present influence of the university examination system virtually guaranteed such whole class, direct instruction. Instruction focused almost entirely on lecture with occasional questions asked of students, drills, board work of the most traditional kind, and a limited number of other large group techniques.

In spite of the ministry of education's continued insistence on the importance of individualized instruction (George, 1988b), teacher-directed, textbook-centered, large group instruction was the only model used by teachers in any classroom, in any high school we observed. No small group work was ever employed during the period of our observations. No cooperative learning was utilized. No use of concrete materials, no active involvement of the students was in evidence. No media. No student work was posted. Bulletin boards that might add color and flavor to a classroom were also frequently missing or empty, leaving most classrooms with what American observers judged to be a bland if not barren

look. No computers were utilized. No class discussion pursued. No students asked questions, ever. Even when solicited, student questions were few. Curiosity, clarification, or the expression of opinion or point of view was still not part of the educational process in the Japanese high school. It was the task of the teacher to put forth the required national curriculum; it was the duty of the student to master it.

> Evan: *The Japanese teachers taught pretty much the same way my teachers did at home. Except that American students are always interrupting the teacher with questions.*

Even in English classes, the emphasis remained on written translations, with little or no opportunity for conversation even after six years of English study. Many English classes were consumed by having students write lengthy sentences on the chalkboard, which the teacher then corrected. The most interesting English exchanges were those which took place almost surreptitiously between the American visitors and students who, in strict or terms, were engaging in off-task behavior.

> Evan: *Their interest in the English language was overshadowed by their fear of making mistakes while talking to me. Their interest in American culture was limitless. They had all kinds of questions, especially about movie stars and professional athletes.*

At Honshin High School, only one teacher of seven attempted anything other than continuous lecture. This teacher, whose subject was politics and economics,

seemed eager to interest the students, attempted to provoke class discussions, and tried to stimulate critical thinking. This was also the only teacher who tried to involve the American visitors in the class; he actually invited the observers to share the teaching of several classes on international relations. Removing himself from the front of the classroom and encouraging his students to speak freely with Westerners about, for example, frictions between Japan and the United States was unique. Attempting to explain his situation, the teacher said, "The classroom is for speaking freely; homework is for examination study." Because "Politics and Economics" was not on the entrance examination, he felt free to try to make the classes timely and relevant but could not ask students to spend time outside of class in the study of that subject.

> EVAN: *This teacher was one of the very best teachers I have ever met, in either country. He really liked to teach. He took it really seriously. He actually taught several interesting classes in Japanese and English simultaneously. I think in that way Dad could understand. I could tell that even the students who were generally uninterested in school were still very much a part of this class, instead of sleeping the way they did in so many other classes.*

By the beginning of the second semester seniors no longer attended club meetings, sports activities were canceled, and homerooms focused exclusively on test preparation and guidance for college entrance. Homework, which had been heavily assigned in the seventh grade, was completely eliminated during the senior year, when students spent every available minute studying for the national examinations. During the period of our ob-

servation. November and December of 1993, everything that did not have direct bearing on university entrance examinations, except physical education, was eliminated. Homeroom time was also devoted to practice questions from one subject or another. Particular teachers offered after school extra help sessions for areas of the examination that students might find troublesome.

For seniors, a week in early December was devoted to taking and analyzing the results of a practice test that was modeled on the lengthy national examination many of the students would take in late January. Anxiety about this practice test was high, and our presence at the school during this period was strongly discouraged. In fact, the faculty seemed generally very nervous about the potential distractions our presence might cause students during this critical two month period and only apprehensively, but generously, gave their permission for our visit at all.

> EVANS: *The students talked about the examinations all the time.*

It is important to point out that in Japan, as in the United States, there are, for whatever reasons, often remarkable differences between the instructional strategies employed in elementary schools and those witnessed in secondary school classrooms. In one very innovative Japanese elementary school visited in 1993, for example, the classroom scenes were strikingly different from the secondary schools in which most of my time was spent. At this elementary school I was able to observe about ten classrooms, and even considering the likelihood that it was not a typical day in a typical elementary school, the differences between this elementary school and the jun-

ior and senior high schools are important to note. First, of course, there were no uniforms worn by public elementary school students, so the darkly somber blue and black colors that dominated the secondary school were replaced by bright, colorful, and varied clothing of many hues. The arrangement of student desks was different in every classroom: small groups, circles, u-shapes, etc. This was striking since I have never been in a Japanese secondary school where the desks were not in rows with students facing the front of the classroom. Again in contrast to the secondary school classrooms I have seen, each classroom in this elementary school virtually shouted with color – bulletin boards, mobiles, bird and animal cages, and a wide variety of student work posted in every possible place in the room.

The instructional strategies employed on this day by the almost all male faculty of this elementary school were dramatically different from those typically used in secondary schools. Every classroom was engaged in some active learning strategy, and the impression received was of learning places full of life and joy. I witnessed choral readings of Japanese poems, several classes of hands-on science activities, small group reports in social studies, and one classroom where the students and their teacher were dancing and singing the multiplication tables with such enthusiasm that even adults felt like joining in. In all ten classrooms virtually no student was visibly off-task. A

5

Goals of Japanese Secondary Schools

Japanese secondary schools were dominated by twin goals, each of which continued to influence teachers and students from the beginning of the secondary school experience until high school graduation. In the early secondary years, one goal appeared to hold sway; by the last year of high school a second goal became dominant. Each goal influenced the curriculum in place in the school, the instructional strategies teachers chose, teacher-student relationships, and the student behavior demonstrated in and outside of class. Much of what we saw and heard can be understood more clearly when viewed through the filter of these overarching goals.

A Primary Goal of the Japanese Junior High School: Inculcating Group Citizenship

Several writers (Duke, 1986; Horio, 1988; and Feinberg, 1993) have argued that one of the central goals of the Japanese school, perhaps the major objective of the junior high school, has been the development of a spirit of unswerving (and perhaps unthinking) loyalty to the group. This appears to be an especially important focus at Hoshizu School.

> The Japanese believe that early adolescents are at a unique point of readiness, when learning about group citizenship, loyalty, duty, and obligation is especially pertinent. Younger children are less able to identify with such large groups; older adolescents and young adults have probably passed the optimal point for the development of these attitudes. While these goals are pursued in both the elementary and the high school, they are most appropriate for the middle level.... Consequently, many hours of the typical week in the Japanese junior high school are devoted to inculcating these group-oriented attitudes (George, 1989, p. 20).

In 1988, the students in the seventh grade at Hombu School who eventually became the seniors involved in the current study were all new to the school, and to secondary education. Each had passed a difficult examination to secure entrance to the school and was most likely concerned about getting off to a good start. They were, consequently, quite receptive to the school faculty's efforts to mold them into a harmonious group and eager as individuals to please their teachers and to be accepted by the other students. Their "politeness" and exemplary behavior seemed directly related to this school goal. The emphasis on group citizenship and unity at Hombu School may have been accelerated by the fact that many new students came from different communities in a large urban area.

As we observed the seventh grade class, in 1988, it seemed as if almost everything was, indeed, connected to developing and strengthening a sense of group citizenship (George, 1989). Uniforms, slippers, the emphasis

on proper posture, rituals for opening and closing the school day and each class period, the insistence upon perfect attendance and punctuality, even the student participation in twice-daily school cleaning activities – all appeared to reinforce the concept of group membership and loyalty. The centrality of the homeroom in the life of the junior high school, and of membership in small, duty-oriented groups ("han") into which the homeroom is divided was carefully designed to inculcate an increased sense of belonging and obligation. The nearly universal participation of junior high students in club activities that met six or seven days a week also seemed an important process for assisting the development of group citizenship among Japanese young adolescents.

The direct instruction uniformly utilized by Japanese junior high school teachers and the standardized national curriculum that is presented to students for memorization both served to further enhance the group-building efforts of the junior high experience. The absence of student questioning and critical thinking, the lack of emphasis on creativity and individual perspective, all contributed to the situation where, as has been said, "the nail that sticks out shall be hammered in." Of course, life in the Japanese home, the prior experiences of the students in elementary school, and the natural inclination of young adolescents in every culture to seek conformity with their peers – all this prepared students well for the intensified emphasis on community they received in junior high school (White, 1987). Many observers of the Japanese school, both western and Japanese, agree that the junior high school has been highly effective in attaining the goal of inculcating a lifelong sense of group loyalty in its students.

The Good of the Academic Senior High School: Passing a University Entrance Examination

From the beginning of the 1993 case study, the off-task behavior in many twelfth grade classes in which we would spend six weeks as observers was at times so severe that my son and I several times used eye signals to each other to express our mutual surprise, even shock, at what we were witnessing. These classes were so entirely unlike those we had observed when the same students were seventh graders that we were taken aback. Teachers in some classes continued lecturing for entire class periods when around them in the class absolutely no one appeared to be paying any attention to what the teacher was doing or saying. Occasionally, in these classes, a teacher would stop and direct a question to a student only to discover, in virtually every instance, that the students had not heard the question and could not provide the answer or even find the place in the textbook to which the teacher had been referring. In each case, when this happened, the teacher would wait patiently until the student, in quick and quiet consultation with others, attempted to find the place in the lesson and attempt an answer. Sometimes, students were so soundly asleep that they could not be wakened to respond to the teacher's questions.

> Evan: *In the seventh grade, my friends never stopped paying attention. Now, some of the same kids never listened.*

How was it, we asked ourselves, that in such a tension-charged pre-examination atmosphere so many students slept through classes or found other ways to engage

on totally off-task behavior? Why were students not eagerly paying attention to every word the teachers uttered in hopes of attaining a higher score on the exam? How could teachers continue lecturing throughout the class period, in class after class, when virtually no students were paying attention, especially when the reputation of the school depended upon students passing the examinations in large numbers? These questions arose on the first day of our observation in the twelfth grade at Hombu School. The dramatic differences between the behavior of the same students in 7th and 12th grades at a time when attention in class should logically have been at its highest levels became a focus of our observations and considerations from the outset.

It seemed unlikely that the five year period between our visits had somehow seen great changes wrought on the students and their attitude toward school; that somehow the quiet, polite, and obedient students we had known in the seventh grade had been transformed into the sort of rude factions that even American teachers would refuse to tolerate. We surmised that perhaps the rigors of six years of Japanese secondary education of the sort we had witnessed in 1988 had somehow simply exhausted the students' capacities to be attentive and polite, that the system had, perhaps, broken down under its own weight. Perhaps five years of increasing wealth and international recognition had lulled the Japanese nation into a state of increased relaxation that was reflected in the classroom behavior of high school seniors. Perhaps the "creeping decadence" that many older Japanese fear had increased to the point where it was manifested in public school students' classroom behavior. Perhaps the fact that Hombu was associated with a liberal university could explain some of the variance in behavior exhibited by the same students in 7th and 12th grades.

One afternoon, during a class so completely off-task that virtually no student was attending to the teacher, an always gentle, friendly, and well-behaved student sitting near to me in the rear of the room turned and began to talk quietly to me about the behavior of the students. This student was one with whom I had established a good relationship five years earlier and had easily renewed during this period in 1993. Among the confidential comments she made to me that day, about this class and others, were the following:

> The students know from common sense that they should be quiet and polite, but they are so anxious about the coming entrance examinations that they cannot be quiet or sit still.
>
> I am angry with the government because of this situation. The government must change the examination system immediately. The students feel so bad that they want to kill themselves (Here she quickly makes the suicidal gesture of "seppuku"). I also feel this way. The Japanese government is responsible for the suicide of so many students.
>
> The Japanese government is very concerned about money and increases the pressure on students to study, but the situation cannot continue the way it has.
>
> The Japanese government is without sympathy for children.

I don't like the Japanese government.

Adults do not like children to speak plainly, but some do so.

This student's comments were made with such quiet but steely force, and with thinly veiled anger and tension, that in my notes I quickly wrote that "perhaps some of what we had been witnessing has been a severe and almost aberrant form of test anxiety." I had also learned through interviews with other seniors, at about the same time, that some of the students who were sleeping through class the next day were students who, the previous evenings, had attended lengthy late night test preparation "juku" (private cram school) sessions and stayed up half the night studying for the examination from the lessons that they had been given there.

Other factors that seemed to support the primacy of the university entrance examination as a central factor in the widespread off-task behavior we were witnessing included the fact that, contrary to practice in the United States, the only thing that mattered in college entrance in Japan were these examinations. School performance as reflected in course grades, class standings, extracurricular activities, or teacher's recommendations carried virtually no weight in the college admission process. The test score was everything. In 1994 some colleges and universities had begun to introduce various alternatives to traditional admission practices. To date, however, such innovations are few and unremarkable.

Consequently, if a particular class was not covering content that was included on the entrance examination, tense and weary students had no real motivation for listening carefully, or for being quiet, or staying awake. If

a teacher chose to instruct a class in a lifeless, droning lecture, perhaps reading much of the lesson from the opening to the closing bells, students were not drawn to the subject by the power of the teacher. In the same way, if a student had opted not to take the national university entrance examination and had, instead, chosen to seek entrance to a less prestigious college or a trade school, the curriculum of the typical day in the senior class had little or no inherent appeal. There was also a group of students who, by mid-December, had already taken these examinations to other post-secondary schools, had received their results, and knew what their educational futures held. Finally, the students who must have already given up on post-secondary education and for whom the tests had, therefore, little meaning, might have been simply drifting through the days until the winter vacation and eventual graduation at the end of the semester.

The importance of the university entrance examinations and the status attached to university attendance was brought home to us during a conversation with a teacher about a student who had, in early December, told us that he had already been admitted to a university. This student, who had come to be a friend of my son, said only that he had been admitted to a university in Nagoya for the coming year. At that same time, Evan had also happily received notice of having been admitted to the college of his choice and told the teacher about that school. When we asked the teacher which university had admitted our young friend, the teacher responded that he did not know, but that it was "definitely not a major university," not the prestigious public national university in that city. The teacher continued, explaining that which college examination a student had passed or not is a very sensitive question in Japan. He said, "It is, I think, much

(Not the question 'Are you black or Hispanic?' would be in America."

> EVAN: *When I was talking to my friend he informed me that he had been accepted into his school. But when I asked him which school he was going to go to, he would only say that 'It is near Tokyo.'*

Of graduates from all high schools, estimates are that about 90% of the students continue to some sort of post-secondary education. In the case of college preparatory high schools, almost all graduates continue their education. (N. Sato, personal communication, December 11, 1993). Each year, about 38% pass the examination that provides entrance to one of the prestigious national universities. It is also interesting to note that, of all students taking the entrance examination each year, 30% are currently high school seniors, and 30% are what the Japanese now call "ronin." Two centuries ago, ronin was the term that described samurai warriors who, for one reason or another, had no master, no leader whom they served. These ronin wandered aimlessly across the landscape of Japan in search of a master in whose service they could enlist. Today, ronin is the term applied to Japanese high school graduates who failed to pass the entrance examination to a national public university and who are taking another entire year, sometimes two or three, of full-time study and attendance at expensive test preparation juku prior to retaking the examination. The percentage of ronin among the annual national examination test takers has been rising each year (N. Sato, personal communication, December 11, 1993).

One high school graduate known personally to Go was spending a post-graduation year as a ronin during

the time of our case study. After years of intensive study and test preparation as a secondary school pupil, this diligent young person spent the greatest part of each and every day of that additional year in the bedroom, at the desk, continuing to review and re-prepare to take the university entrance examinations – hour upon hour of lonely study, with a diligence which seemed unmatched by anything in our experience as Americans. For the first time, this student had enrolled in juku classes for the extra assistance they might provide. It was also, in essence, a partnership between the student and the mother of the family who devoted much of her time that year to coaching, encouraging, tutoring, and preparing meals for him. Fortunately, this student succeeded in passing the entrance examination during this second year and the lives of both the student and the mother could move forward again.

> *Evans: I don't know anybody in America who would study like that. No matter what.*

The reputations of all academic high schools are, then, based on the number of graduating students who are admitted to one of the nine or ten prestigious universities (e.g., the University of Tokyo, Nagoya University, Kyoto University, Waseda University, and so on). While the ranking of high schools for this purpose is unofficial, everyone concerned appeared to know exactly what rank a particular high school had within its district with regard to university entrance. Parents, students, and teachers devoted tremendous attention and developed considerable anxiety regarding the high school entrance examinations that preceded the high school experience and university entrance examination preparation process.

On a visit to one academic high school in Osaka in December 1993, it was immediately and proudly conveyed to me that I was in a "most honorable" school where "100% of the students go on to some sort of post-secondary education." Admission to this high school was available to only the brightest and most diligent junior high school students. At this school, 250 of the 600 graduates attended one of the prestigious national public universities, 300 attended a prestigious private university, and 50 attended junior or community colleges. The school, administrators said, was "number two" out of the 27 high schools in one of the nine school districts in the Osaka prefecture. This ranking came solely on the basis of the number of students who passed university entrance examinations, and the focus of curriculum and instruction in the school was admittedly and exclusively on the content of the national curriculum. Admission to the school was highly competitive; no special education students were admitted to the school. While the school principal reported that his first duty was to "train students to be good citizens," he could offer no specific examples of how this was accomplished at the school.

Like high schools in Japan, colleges and universities are often highly specialized; very few comprehensive universities or liberal arts colleges in the American model are present in Japan. Entrance examinations are as many and varied as the type of post-secondary education institution a student seeks to attend, because except for the comprehensive examinations for the national university system, each post-secondary institution has its own special entrance tests. Nonetheless, if it is correct that the inculcation of a spirit of group citizenship has been a primary goal of the Japanese junior high school, it can also be argued that the primary goal of the senior year at vir-

tually all Japanese public academic high schools, and the Honshu High School in particular, has been to have as many students as possible pass an entrance examination, preferably the national public university exam.

This goal determines the surprisingly off-task behavior we observed in virtually every 12th grade class at Honshu High School. These features of their school lives made us more curious about how the students perceived the experience of their senior year in high school and how this might compare to a similar group of American high school seniors. Consequently, we undertook a series of interviews with 24 seniors from Honshu High School and a matching school in the United States. 3

6

The High School Senior Experience: Japanese and American Student Perspectives

The 12th grade classrooms at Honshu High School contained a group of students whose observable characteristics sharply distinguished them from their American counterparts. Of course, since the students were virtually all of the same race, their skin and hair colors and their facial structures were very similar. Even though the rigid discipline of the lower secondary school appeared to have softened somewhat for second semester seniors, hair styles were very similar. Perhaps most noticeably, the students continued to dress in the standard uniforms and wore the slippers which were mandatory in all except a small number of ultra-liberal high schools. Additionally, white socks were worn by almost all of the boys and girls. Bright colors were otherwise absent from their attire or the accessories they wore or carried. no girl wore noticeable makeup, and earrings were uncommon; only one boy in the twelfth grade wore an earring. Many of the Japanese boys and girls were shorter, at age 17, than American students of the same age. Virtually all of the Japanese twelfth grade students, both male and female, were thin; overweight students, such as are frequently found in American classrooms, were practically nonexistent. Observed together, the students appeared to be a remarkably homogeneous group.

Evan: Dad, I disagree. I think the most noticeable quality was that some students were stretching the dress code limits as far as they could, especially compared to five years ago. They seemed more interested in American brands and styles of clothing, and even though they had to wear uniforms, they were given a little more freedom than they had in seventh grade. In some other high schools, they could even wear shoes when they were seniors.

Behaviorally, Japanese high school seniors also seemed to differ from American students in a number of ways. Perhaps because of the regulations regarding dress, there was little attention or time devoted to grooming; students were not unkempt. They simply spent little time in school attending to how they looked. Although students reported that they had boyfriends or girlfriends, the sort of continuous, flirtatious, boy-girl interaction that might be common in American twelfth grade classrooms seemed absent in the Japanese school. Japanese students' interactions seemed devoid of the sort of sexual load which adults believe to weigh down many American students' conversations. Certainly, because of the nature of the twelfth grade academic program, the students had very little time to be involved outside the classroom in boy-girl interaction, and this may have acted to retard its presence in the classroom.

Evan: The way the boys and girls acted in the Japanese 12th grade reminded me of how my American friends acted in the 9th grade. They were definitely interested in each other, but seemed to have little experience with being either a boyfriend or a

> *girlfriend. The boys also seemed to have an incredible amount of respect for the girls, compared to back in the U.S.A. I have never seen 18 year-old boys be so polite to girls that age.*

Students gathered in informal groups during free time between classes and at lunch time, eager to interact, since many of the students traveled a considerable distance to reach the school and few lived in the same neighborhood with other classmates. Most of the time, these groups were gender based. Groups of boys, for example, quickly ate their lunch during the ten minutes before the class that preceded lunch so that they could have the entire lunch time to play basketball or Japanese handball. At lunch time, groups of girls ate together then played cards or engaged in friendly talk. After several weeks of observations, it seemed that these groups were also composed of students who were at a similar point in terms of their current academic achievement or goals for further study.

> Evan: *The boys who had already passed an entrance examination, were confident of doing so, or who had given up, played ball and had a great time. The others were out of sight in the library or classroom with their faces in books.*

Earlier observations of the same students in the seventh grade (George, 1989) had led us to surmise that Japanese early adolescents were less mature, certainly less sophisticated socially and sexually than were American students of a similar age. Even the term "childlike" might have been appropriate. In 1993, however, the twelfth grade students appeared to act in age-appropriate ways.

they even seemed more mature, in some ways, than their American counterparts. To an American observer, the students seemed calmer and more at ease about boy-girl interactions. Occasionally, couples would talk quietly in the hallway between classes or at lunch time, and students reported that they had boyfriends or girlfriends, but this was the extent to which such relationships were manifested in the schools. It is also possible, of course, that what seems to Americans to be the typical concerns of adolescence were fully present but much less conspicuously so, since Japanese of all ages are commonly thought to be expert in keeping their emotions under wraps.

> Ellen: *The students in my school are different. Even though some are quiet and keep everything to themselves, many will tell anyone anything.*

One emotion, in particular, was noticeably absent in the interpersonal interactions of the Japanese students – anger. Only once, in almost two months of continuous observations of classroom interaction at the twelfth grade level, was a student observed openly expressing anger; then only moderately and briefly. It seemed related to a boy-girl situation. At no other time were students observed in angry interactions with each other or with their teachers. No teacher was ever observed expressing what would be considered anger by Americans, in spite of what Westerners might have considered to be reasonable provocation.

Embarrassment and shyness were much more obvious in the classroom than anger. Students almost always seemed embarrassed or shy, certainly self-conscious, when called upon to answer a question or recite in class – even when responding to a foreigner's greeting. When

responding to a teacher's request for an answer or a recitation, students uniformly spoke in subdued, almost inaudible tones, whether or not they were confident that they were correct. Perhaps the expression of anger in the classroom would have brought such mortifying attention to the offending student that acting angrily was simply out of the question.

> Evan: *Anger and embarrassment are both very common in my high school in America, but I think often times anger is used to cover up or make up for embarrassment.*

Comparing Japanese Students in Seventh and Twelfth Grades

A number of interesting comparisons were possible between the class of twelfth grade students studied in 1993 and the class that included many of the same students five years earlier in 1988 (George, 1989). There were, of course, many physical differences attributable to maturation. As seniors, the students had all experienced puberty and the attendant growth and development. Because they continued to wear the required uniforms and slippers, however, and because many of their activities were similar to those in which they had engaged in seventh grade, the classroom situation seemed very familiar to me as returning observers. There were, however, a number of substantial differences between the students as seventh and twelfth graders, especially in terms of classroom behavior. Perhaps most noticeable was the difference we described above in what the Japanese call "politeness."

As seventh graders, the students had seemed to be uniformly well behaved, respectful, and courteous, especially when compared to the typical seventh grade class of American young adolescents. In 1988, this group of seventh grade Japanese students had invariably risen to attention immediately and bowed smartly when a teacher entered the room and again when the teacher departed. Student posture, when seated, was consistently straight, if not stiff, throughout the entire class hour. Off-task behavior was uncommon, as was tardiness; discipline problems such as might occur in American classes were simply nonexistent. Even minor infractions were rare. Absences were equally infrequent. The seventh graders were models of proper deportment, to use an old American term.

It became immediately and arrestingly obvious to us on our first day in the twelfth grade classroom, however, that as seniors the behavior of the same students was markedly different, and it remained consistently so throughout the period of our observations. On a typical day, for example, several students were absent, and a few would be tardy to school in the morning or to class during the day. In direct contrast to their behavior five years earlier, these senior students were exceedingly casual about rising and bowing when teachers entered or left the classroom; many students simply remained seated or rose half-way and then bowed halfheartedly if at all. They did not seem resentful, or angry; they were not overtly rebellious. In fact, their interaction with teachers between classes was always respectful and often very positive, even filled with personal warmth and affection. They simply seemed to take this responsibility and many others much less seriously, almost listlessly, as if they no longer had the will or the strength to comply. A few students continued to sit rammrod straight and to remain constantly attentive

throughout the class period, as they had in seventh grade. Many others, however, primarily boys, regularly slouched low in their seats.

In a majority of classes, off-task behavior by twelfth grade boys and girls was more the norm than the exception during the period of our study. In not a few classes, students chatted gaily among themselves throughout the class period, across the room to one another, seemingly oblivious to the teacher's efforts at instruction. Reading comic books was a frequent diversion for several boys and girls. In virtually every class, at least one student slept throughout the period. In several classes, a half dozen or more students were observed to be asleep at one time. In one class, 10 of the 25 students were asleep at one point. One particular student slumbered through virtually every class, for six straight weeks, in spite of occasional efforts by teachers to rouse him.

Such dramatic variance in student behavior, from seventh to twelfth grades was, as we have reported, the single most notable difference between the first year of secondary school and the last. Our curiosity about this situation became the most important focus for continuing observations and later interviews with students and teachers. The factor which eventually emerged from these inquiries, an increased understanding of the effect of varying goals of the two different levels of the Japanese secondary school, seemed to explain much of the substantial changes in student behavior that we observed.

Comparing Japanese and American Perspectives on Twelfth Grade

In an attempt to further understand the significance of the senior high school year for Japanese high school students near the midpoint of the 1993-94 school year, 24 graduating high school seniors in two similar high schools (Honshu High School in Japan and a comparison school in the United States) were interviewed about their school experiences, aspirations, and ideas about schooling in each other's country. Each student was asked to reflect on the high school experience, the senior year, the teachers, the family's role in their education, plans for the future, worries, friends, perceptions of themselves as students, and several other factors. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes. Comparisons of students' perspectives, within and across national groups, provided interesting data about the senior year in high school in the two countries, but especially about the experience of Japanese seniors.

The Japanese students attended a junior-senior high school associated with a prestigious national university in Japan. American students also attended a school associated with a major state university in the southeastern United States. The Japanese school contained grades 7-12; the American school contained grades 8-12. Both high schools were relatively small, with approximately 100 students in each high school grade; both were thought, by those who are acquainted with each school, to be relatively liberal schools as a result of their association with a major university.

Students attending each school were described by school personnel as representative of what might be described as the middle class in each community. Admis-

sions at the American school were further managed so that the student body was representative of the racial and ethnic makeup of the community in which it was located. Admission to the Japanese school was through a competitive examination. The goals and the curriculum of both schools were almost exclusively college preparatory; neither offered any comprehensive vocational program.

The majority of students who were interviewed, both in Japan and the United States, had attended the school for all of their high school years, and many had attended the school from the beginning of the seventh grade. In every case, the student, or the parents of the student, had chosen the school instead of a traditional public high school.

Students in both schools reported similar reasons for having chosen to attend the university-related schools: (1) because the school was small, perceived to be more student-oriented, and offered what students described as more freedom to students than they might have found in a large, traditionally public high school; (2) because their parents or siblings had attended the school; or, (3) because their parents believed that the school provided the type of environment that best fit their child. No student voiced what would be described as dissatisfaction with the school seriously enough to have caused them to consider transferring to another high school. Asked to provide suggestions for the improvement of the school, the majority of the students expressed satisfaction, for the most part, with the way the school was presently organized and operated, although the American students were more inclined to suggest possible improvements or things they would like to see changed.

All 24 students were chosen for interviews by the administration in each school. At the Japanese school,

the selection focused on students whose academic success was such that they were capable of conversing in English at a level appropriate for the interview. At the American school, administrators selected students they believed would be the academic equivalents of their Japanese counterparts, although only one of the American students had studied Japanese. Each of the 24 students was judged to be among the more successful students in his/her class, eager to participate, articulate, positive, and able to reflect on his or her experience.

Japanese Seniors' Reflections on Their High School Experience

Difficulty of High School Program. The majority of Japanese high school seniors reported that their high school experience, including their senior year, was extremely difficult in terms of the challenges presented and the effort required of them. They said that high school was considerably more difficult, and far more important than junior high school had been. It was, however, what they had expected of high school. They also agreed that, as high school seniors, they had more freedom, but that along with that freedom came responsibility. Said one, "We have freedom, but we must think about what freedom is. As junior high school students, we haven't thought about freedom. It is a big point; teachers always talk about that here." Teachers were reported to be friendlier than those from junior high; perhaps, a few students thought, because the teachers felt less urgency to motivate students.

High school, though much more difficult, was also perceived as more enjoyable than junior high school – more school events, extended field trips, and school festivals. Asked to describe their favorite and most difficult

classes, the Japanese students nominated a variety of answers. Mathematics, however, was mentioned as the favorite class by about half of the group. English and mathematics were identified as the most difficult subjects in their schedule for the senior year.

Students were asked about time spent on homework. These Japanese students reported an average time of about 3–4 hours per day spent on homework throughout their high school years in addition to 2–6 hours per week attending a "juku" (after-school school). As seniors, however, the time spent on studying had little or nothing to do with classes at school, since virtually no homework was given to 12th graders during the semester prior to the university entrance examination. Out-of-school study time was devoted to preparation for that examination. The students reported the same amounts of time being spent in this way.

Club activities had constituted a very important part of school life for virtually every Japanese student. Each student, with only one exception, named a club to which they had belonged for years, participating on a daily basis before or after school and often on weekends. Here they made friends and formed supportive groups to which they felt a strong loyalty and where they enjoyed a firm sense of belonging. Clubs in art, tennis, cooking, sewing, basketball, baseball, archery, handball, and running were all described enthusiastically. During their senior year, however, after summer vacation, club activities came to an abrupt end as study for the upcoming university entrance examination became the exclusive focus in the lives of these high school seniors.

Their Teachers. Asked to identify the characteristics of good teachers, Japanese 12th graders described a good

teacher as one who was warm and friendly, able to focus on individual students as persons. The good teacher, in their opinion, was one who eagerly participated in school events, being involved in the club activities that are so much a part of life in the Japanese high school. Such teachers made the class enjoyable, by making it interesting and varied. Good teachers managed classrooms in ways that became productive in terms of student learning. Poor teachers, by contrast, were "always angry and critical," and persisted in the use of lecture as the only teaching method throughout each class, and from day to day throughout the year. In these terms, it was difficult to identify teachers at Honshu School who would qualify as a "good teacher."

> Exam: *Their ideas of a good teacher seemed to be the opposite of the typical teacher they had in class.*

Friends and Family. The Japanese 12th graders valued friendship, although the extent of their involvement in a friendship group seemed restricted largely to school experiences and club activities. Students at the school reported warm and friendly relationships among the students there, and attributed these relationships to the small size of the school and to the fact that many of the students had been together since the seventh grade. They saw their friends as having been diligent students throughout most of their high school years, although by their senior year many of their friends had become discouraged about the prospects of being admitted to a university and had become reconciled to the idea of entering the world of work following graduation. Several predicted that about half of the senior class would do so.

The families of these seniors held high hopes for their futures. In this school, however, those hopes apparently did not translate into daily budgeting of students to study or to work more diligently. Parents provided high expectations but not the extraordinarily close supervision that western stereotypes might suggest. These students reported that their parents were supportive and helpful when asked, but as one student said, "They give me freedom. Always crying 'ganbatte' (work harder) is not good. They have confidence in me."

Personal Assessments and Aspirations. Japanese students were hesitant in expressing estimates of their personal strengths and weaknesses, perhaps because of cultural prohibitions about discussing such matters under the conditions of the interviews. Most did not offer a response to this question. One student said "We think only about school, so we haven't thought about this." Asked to estimate whether they were *A, B, C, D, or F students*, all identified themselves as *B or C* students.

> Leah: *One major difference between my Japanese and American friends is the tremendous modesty of the Japanese students. I never heard any of them say they did great at anything – instead they would say just 'okay' or bad.*

When asked about ways in which they spent their leisure time, the Japanese students were, for the most part, only able to identify what they would enjoy if they had the leisure time to do so. At this time in their senior year, the students said that virtually every available moment was devoted to studying for the upcoming university entrance examinations. When asked what leisure time ac-

movies they had enjoyed, they identified activities that could be done alone, such as viewing movies, listening to music, playing a musical instrument, drawing, swimming, running, and skiing as their favorites. Only two students mentioned activities that they did with their friends.

Plans for the future, of the students interviewed, all hinged on the university entrance examination. All reported a desire to attend a university or another sort of post-secondary education. All had at least one possible career in mind: illustrator, actress, biochemist, hotel manager, teacher, engineer, and so forth. When asked about their "worries," the responses also were connected to their aspirations and the university entrance examination. Half of the students mentioned that their primary worry was concerned with that examination; the other half, perhaps more confident about the examination, worried about whether they would be able to be successful in college. Only two students mentioned being worried about non-academic matters; one expressed concerns about a relationship, the other about current Japanese political difficulties.

Beliefs About American Schools. Japanese students described an interesting picture of what they believed about the typical American high school. The modal word used in describing their concept of American high school was "freedom." They believed that rules were much more flexible in American schools, and that students had far more choices in both the curriculum they studied and the personal style they chose. They thought that American students must enjoy changing classrooms, not having to wear uniforms, and having the freedom to wear jewelry; one student thought that American mothers probably enjoyed the existence of cafeterias since they must not have to

spend so much time preparing nutritious lunches for their children.

Although they thought American high school classes had fewer students, they were not convinced that American students were studying harder or learning more. They believed that American schools probably were easier than Japanese high schools. Sadly, however, the second most frequently used word to describe American high schools was not "easy" but "dangerous." The presence of guns and the frequency of violence were mentioned by several students. One student who wanted to major in English expressed concern that her parents would not let her study in America because of the dangerous situation in many communities.

> Evan: *I hate to think that their impression of US high schools is "dangerous." I think their fears may be a little exaggerated, but for the most part it seems regrettably true.*

It is possible that the Japanese students might have had more critical assessments in mind, but politeness kept them from sharing these. One student said that "It is discourteous to criticize American schools."

American Seniors' Reflections on Their High School Experience

Difficulty of the High School Program. The American 12th graders interviewed for the study had a very different set of perceptions regarding the level of difficulty and challenge provided for them at their high school. Virtually every student asserted that his/her senior year was

"by far the easiest" of their high school careers. They described it, separately, as "laid back," "passing time," a "lot easier," "coasting," "the second semester is a waste of time," and "more fun." Many students were enrolled in fewer classes than they had taken in earlier years because they had already accumulated sufficient credits for high school graduation, and college examinations and applications had all been completed. At this point, they said, "grades didn't really matter." The teachers "let you slack off." The junior year had been the most academically rigorous of the high school experience, they said, but several students argued that ninth and tenth grades had been no more difficult than the senior year. The students did assert that the first semester had been hectic because of the process of applying for college admission, seeking scholarships and loans, and making related decisions.

Asked whether this relatively low level of difficulty was a surprise to them when they came to the high school level, they answered negatively. It had been "about what I expected" many stated. Eleven of the 12 students also stated that they would have preferred to have been offered a more rigorous and challenging academic program throughout high school. They voiced concern about whether they would be as well prepared for success in college as students from other high schools in the area.

The students were also candid about describing their favorite and most difficult courses. Half the students identified Advanced Placement English as their favorite course; a smaller group identified physics. When they identified their most difficult course, it tended, interestingly, to be the same course as their favorite. Students' favorite courses also tended to be the most difficult for them; and vice versa. They seemed to say that they appreciated a rigorous classroom learning environ-

ment and would have liked more of the same sort of classes. When asked about suggestions for improving the school they attended, they continued to suggest an increased level of difficulty. They also lamented the paucity of curriculum offerings, while recognizing that this was one of the disadvantages of attending the sort of small high school they prized. "Perhaps," they said, "it could be a little bigger."

When asked about the amount of time they spent on homework, one student replied, "You mean this year? Hardly any." Another said "Embarrassingly little." Estimates ranged from no time at all spent on homework to approximately one hour; the average seemed to be about 1/2 hour. The students did say that they had studied more the previous year, perhaps as much as an hour or more each day. Yet, when asked, ten students evaluated themselves as "A" students, and the remaining two identified themselves as "A-" students.

> EVANS: *I think that if you compared how much time and effort Japanese and American students put into studying and college preparation, the scale would be overwhelmingly tipped toward the Japanese. If American students had to put in as much time studying as the Japanese do, there would be a heck of a lot more drop outs.*

This group of high school seniors was very deeply involved in school activities. In school, eight were members of the student council, one being the president and another an officer. At least four were members of the National Honor Society; one was president of this organization. Many participated in school-sponsored sports teams: basketball, football, volleyball, track, soccer,

weightlifting, golf, and tennis. Environmental and service clubs were popular. The yearbook editors were also among the students interviewed.

Their Teachers. Like their Japanese counterparts, American high school seniors interviewed for this study were eager to discuss the characteristics of good and poor teachers. Also like the Japanese students, American seniors described both good and poor teachers in terms that had little to do with their estimates of the subject matter knowledge possessed by the teachers. Good teachers were, more than anything else, ones who cared deeply about the act of teaching and the students involved. Students used the term "care" again and again, as they talked about good teachers. Such teachers were "demanding but still laid back," respectful of the student as a person. They controlled the class effectively, providing a structured atmosphere in which students could learn. Good teachers were motivators; they had many ways to teach. They were willing to persist in explaining, providing numerous examples to illustrate difficult points or concepts.

Poor teachers, by contrast, had little control of the classroom or achieved control by insulting and embarrassing students and were constantly critical and negative. Poor teachers lectured constantly as their only instructional strategy. Lectures, in a poor teacher's classroom, were supplemented only by "busywork," and "read the chapter" substituted for effective explanations. Poor teachers don't "care" about teaching, the subject, or their students.

Friends and Family. Most of the students agreed that their particular friends were also good students. Most cared about their grades, and believed that it was not

"cool" to fail. They said that they and their friends supported and challenged one another to do well and had done so for many years at this school. They estimated that, although a substantial number of their classmates would enter the world of work, their particular friends would continue with some level of post-secondary education, most attending a nearby university or community college.

They reported that their families were supportive and encouraging. Families held high expectations for student academic success, often closely monitoring grades, major assignments, and examination preparations. Most of their parents expected them to go to college.

Personal Assessments and Aspirations. American students in this study were more forthcoming regarding estimates of their personal or academic strengths and weaknesses than the Japanese students. High expectations for themselves, leadership skills, and task persistence were frequently identified strengths. Pre-examination was specifically mentioned as a major weakness by half of the students. Several others identified a lack of interest in reading as a weakness, one student saying "I wish I liked to read more."

Leisure time was an important part of the lives of these American high school seniors. Spending little or no time on schoolwork meant, of course, that they had much more leisure time than their Japanese peers. Where Japanese students tended to identify individual activities or performances, these American seniors named sports, computer games, television, movies, and other entertainment-oriented activities. They were very likely (9 out of 12) to report that their leisure time activities involved doing

something with friends: going to the beach, out to dinner, dancing, or partying.

These students *expected* to attend a college or university the next year. Half expected to attend the university with which their high school was associated; others expected to attend a nearby community college. Here, too, their worries focused on the future; not on admission to a university, but on whether they would be successful students in higher education. They seemed confident that they would be admitted, but worried about how well they would do, once having matriculated. As mentioned above, *almost all* of these students thought of themselves as "A" students.

Beliefs About Japanese Schools. In a person, these students believed that Japanese schools were far more demanding, more challenging than their own. They thought that Japanese schools were likely to be *stricter, tougher, more serious, intense, competitive,* and *more disciplined.* Such schools were likely, they thought, to be places where students and teachers were more serious, more dedicated to their work, and were learning more than American students. They thought that Japanese schools probably had less trouble with drugs, violence, hate, and other problems they believed were endemic to high schools in America. They were not entirely enamored with such schools, however. They estimated that Japanese high schools were places where great pressure produced stress-related suicides, where the program was so academic that there were few activities, less athletic opportunity, fewer opportunities for anything other than compulsive work. Japan, they believed, was a nation where "If you don't do well in school, your life is pretty much over."

Conversions and Contrasts

Examination of the best-known literature describing recent conditions in Japanese and American high schools (Duke, 1986; Feinberg, 1993; Goodlad, 1983; Hobin, 1988; Sizer, 1985,1992) indicates that the perceptions of these high school students and that literature are congruent. Such a reading also suggests that each group of students' perceptions of the school attended by their across-the-world counterparts may contain considerable accuracy. Those who have written about the Japanese high school agreed with the students in this study that the twelfth grade there can often be accurately described as a time in which mastery of an arcane curriculum and preparation for incredibly rigorous, Confucian-style university examinations take precedence over everything else in the lives of students and teachers. Leisure time, school activities, and a balanced life are pushed aside by a process that leaves thousands, if not millions, of Japanese students, parents, and educators anxious and dissatisfied.

Those who have written about the contemporary American high school agree, for the most part, with the students in this study that their twelfth grade experience, and that of many other American high school seniors, is one where great portions of available time are passed unproductively. School life, for these students, is frequently a social rather than an academic one. While students describe themselves, their friends, their families, and their futures in primarily positive terms, there remains an uncomfortable awareness of the lost opportunity for a richer, more meaningful educational experience as the capstone of their lives in public education.

In the '90s, the general public in each nation may have reached a point where interest in and attempts to

learn from practices in the other nation have begun to decline, to be replaced by indifference, if not outright rejection of the concept of mutual benefit. Even educators may have, reasonably, grown tired of the endless negative comparisons and the strident exhortations to improve that frequently follow comparisons between Japan and the United States. These youth, however, indicate that there is still a great deal to be learned from one another. We would be foolish to ignore their insights or their suggestions. A

7

What Can Americans Learn from the Japanese Secondary School?

The educational experiences of the Japanese secondary school students we studied in the public academic secondary school seemed totally shaped by an all-important educational quartet: the development of group citizenship, a national curriculum, memorization-oriented instructional strategies, and, in the twelfth grade, the over-arching, all-consuming importance of the university entrance examination.

These four factors appeared to influence almost every moment of secondary school classroom life. The national curriculum and the university examination that was drawn from it were so invariably dominant in each classroom that students mastered volumes of arcane details in a wide variety of subjects. Instruction served these two masters so that, by the twelfth grade, most class hours were passed with little attention to the inherent interests of older adolescents and without any sustained or authentic interest from the students in the nature of what has been presented for them to learn. Senior students at Hotohsu School were either bored enough to sleep, read comic books, and carry on conversational chatter, or so tense that they could not act in the polite and respectful ways that they knew to be correct, or both. Some senior students at Hotohsu School seemed quietly angry, dis-

contagion, or alienated by their socially-coerced participation in this process.

The result was a lengthy period during the senior year of high school in which the educational outcomes were distinctly different from what many Japanese educators, parents, and teachers seem to have planned. A national curriculum with apparently little authentic relevance to the lives of learners seemed firmly embedded in high school. Instructional strategies utilized by most senior high teachers emphasized rote memorization of minor details which may have appeared on college entrance examinations. Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of classroom hours were passed with little or no student-engaged participation in learning; while, ironically, many students attended private examination cram school hours several nights each week. The focus and root cause of all of these situations was a set of rigid life-determining university entrance examinations.

As the attention of many American educators now turns to the reform and restructuring of high school education (see, for example, the entire issue of *Educational Leadership*, for February 1993, or *Education Week*, January 19, 1994), there may be several lessons to be learned from the Japanese high school. The desirability of a nationally mandated curriculum for American schools, with accompanying standards, comprehensive examinations, and examination-tailored teaching strategies should be considered only with the clear recognition of the negative outcomes associated with these practices in such highly admired nations as Japan. Tinkering with the locally controlled comprehensive high school model should be done only with the greatest deliberation, and national efforts aimed at replacing the comprehensive high school with separate academic, vocational, or commercial high

schools with admission determined by rigorous examinations during the middle school years may have seriously undesirable outcomes unless flaws discovered in the Japanese experience are designed out of a new American high school model. Few argue with the assessment that the American high school almost desperately needs reform, but it seems increasingly clear that the contemporary Japanese high school is not the model to which we should turn for enlightenment.

In recent years, Americans have developed, correctly I think, a great appreciation for the quality and productivity of Japanese institutions, both corporate and educational. Our attention and admiration have been drawn to the differences between Japanese and American automobiles, and the seemingly dramatic gaps in the test scores between students in the two nations. We have, I think, learned a great deal from the Japanese corporate world that has helped America get back on a competitive footing in several areas. Many American educators, myself among them, have looked to Japanese education for concepts and practices that might help improve secondary school programs in the United States. There are, I believe, a number of important practices in the Japanese system of schooling that can be of potentially great use in American schools. The importance of the school's role in developing a cohesive national identity and a sense of group citizenship in each student, for instance, are areas where we can still learn lessons of great importance from the Japanese system.

But the Japanese high school will not, I think, be the model we wish to emulate in the years ahead. As American educators explore the value of developing a national curriculum with matching standards and evaluation systems we should think long and hard about the

apparent results of such a system in the Japanese high school. As we take steps to make sharp differentiations in the high school curriculum that may substantially alter the American comprehensive high school model, we need to consider the outcomes of such programs elsewhere. As we seek to further develop democratic and multicultural educational institutions, schools where students ask no questions and where critical thinking is absent cannot be our model. Great portions of student class time spent entirely off-task, a curriculum with little relevance to the lives of the high school students who must endure it, text-driven and memorization-centered instructional strategies, deeply anxious and quietly alienated students whose futures are determined by a single life-wrenching examination, school reputations that reflect only test results — these are not what we seek for America's twenty-first century high schools. Some would argue that American high schools already suffer too much from the same problems. We will not find, there, the solutions in Japan. ∎

8

Japanese Educators Respond

A High School Teacher Responds

This research is a scarce one. At this period, Japanese high school educators seldom permit outsiders to enter 12th grade classrooms. This article tells us an atmosphere of our school accurately. The accuracy reflects Mr. George's efforts at Hiroshima, in Japan. His endeavor carried away many barriers. There he could hear a breath at classroom, and he could talk out what Japanese students thought for in their minds. He had many young friends. Sometimes our students taught me his jokes. I am delighted to see his report about our school accurately.

We Japanese always feel that we are misunderstood by foreigners. And our Japanese teachers feel that we are misunderstood by Japanese journalists and academic world. Professor George Imai's through two barriers in this research. There is the touch of actual school life. He watched [a] medium [level high school]. Japanese journalists write about unusual schools, and our professors know only the top 3% of the high schools, from which these professors had graduated. His descriptions are accurate. I believe that this paper can be foundation stones to enrich our schools.

But, I also have to say [to] readers about some limitations of this investigation. His descriptions are accurate in 1994. But, Japanese society is changing quickly. The term of guarantee [of the accuracy of this study] is not long. The second limitation is a difficulty of interpreting [life in Japan]. If you seek truth from these facts, you have to recognize all of Japanese culture, education, family life, jobs, etc.

Professor George has a rare understanding about Japanese. And he can act more politely than most young Japanese. But it is not perfect. I think that last hand to complete is to understand Confucian virtues. Our mind has multistoried rooms.

But this article does not give me entire satisfaction. Mr. George, are you satisfied with Japanese education? [The two goals described in the paper are] conventional diseases of Japanese secondary education. Improving Japanese school means to stop central control and to use thick [unbiased] textbooks edited freely. Our students are noisy at classroom, and are neglectful, and never like to act in unison. So they are weak, though they are lovely human beings. Japanese are usually dull [uninterested?] in school. When they graduate, and get jobs, they have to fly the white flag for Japanese companies. Japanese companies pin down [students under strict rules in exchange for life long employment.

Please write doubts about us frankly. It's just a first step to truth and sincere friendship. I think the next step is to describe the insides of young Japanese. They have ambivalences in their hearts, in common. Let's talk together about the worries of their life.

Last step, we would like to hear your speech. Mr. George, you had encouraged many students at our school. Please encourage your readers.

A University Education Professor Responds

I read the manuscript with interest. Fundamentally, I have no objections to what is mentioned. Our two countries both have many common, mass-based public schools and similar democratic ideals in spite of the differences mentioned. Honshu High School is not a typical high school, and findings would not apply to private high schools, but the school has almost the same features as ordinary college-preparatory high schools. His descriptions almost correctly apply to general high schools.

While the influence of the university entrance examination process is felt mostly at the high school, its influence begins at an early age. We require a radical change of the university examination system, and in the related hiring and promotion system of business and government.

I believe that Americans can learn two things from Japanese schools. We provide good pay and upgraded social status for teachers. We achieve a minimum guarantee of competency in the basic skills of intellectual subjects.

A Second University Professor Responds

I feel Professor George's observations are very objective and neutral. He restrains himself to evaluate Japanese high school student behavior with an American point of view. However, this school is not typical in Japan in some ways, i.e., in the variety of student behavior, in the range of students' ability, in the school environment, except in the curriculum *and* the ability of the faculty members. Most schools have smaller variety of behavior and smaller range of ability of students.

In most Japanese parents' viewpoint, examination passage is much more important than group citizenship in academic high schools. Therefore, most teachers complain of the parents' attitude that both goals are under teacher's responsibility. I feel the parents' attitude is not fair and the teacher has too much responsibility, especially in group citizenship. However, in Japanese schools this care of teachers for group citizenship may indirectly raise the student academic achievement because of safety and concentration in learning.

Many Westerners criticize the Japanese examination system because of its disaffect to student creativity. I agree partly. However, many Japanese people think the examination system is necessary for the young people because it gives good experience to them to conquer the difficult situations [that will come] in their life. But I feel high school entrance examinations should be taken away, and elective subjects should be given more to deepen students' individuality.

Most Americans seem to think that student creativity is just the most important in school education. But you [they] have to learn that school education must work not only to make better score of academic achievement but also cultivate student personality and citizenship ability. This is the students' "right." Therefore, the basic skills are essential to all the students in order to become a good citizen. A

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